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SUBJECT: MEDIA COVERAGE OF DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY MANN'S
MEETING WITH TURKMENISTAN'S PRESIDENT[B1] MOSTLY POSITIVE
[B2]

Summary

1. (U) Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Steven Mann's March 3-6 visit to Turkmenistan received wide and generally positive coverage in state media. State media only gave coverage of Mann's March 5 meeting with President Berdimuhammedov and omitted his meetings with other government officials. State media inaccurately covered Mann's congratulations to President Berdimuhammedov on the latter's election. Inaccuracy and some Russian-origin "black propaganda" of Mann's meeting with the president followed the visit. End Summary.

Inaccuracy and Omission of State Media Coverage[B3]

2. (U) Following his March 5 meeting with President Berdimuhammedov, Mann gave a lobby statement wherein he noted he had congratulated the president on "assuming the duty of president." Instead, sameday state Watan TV (Turkmen) reported that Mann congratulated the president with his "election" to the position. (Comment: The USG has issued no official statement on the presidential elections on Turkmenistan. End Comment.) The following day, state dailies "Neutral[B4] Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 34,701) and Turkmenistan (Turkmen, circ. 28,091) gave front-page treatment to an article about the meeting. The same day, government website "Turkmenistan-Golden Age" (www.turkmenistan.gov.tm) (Russian) carried the same article. On subsequent days the weeklies "Ashgabat" (Turkmen, circ.16,561), "Watan" (Turkmen, circ. 26,091), "Ahal Durmushy" (Turkmen, circ. 35,391), "Maru-Shahu-Jahan" (Turkmen, circ. 36,252), "Balkan" (Turkmen, circ.24,631), "Dashoguz Habarlary" (Turkmen, circ. 27,183) and "Nesli" (Turkmen, 22,311) gave front-page treatment to the article. (Comment: All state coverage included the same inaccuracy mentioned above. End Comment.) The meeting also received coverage on the government website TURKMENISTAN.RU (English, Russian) on March 6.

3. (U) State media omitted Mann's meetings with other high-ranking government officials. However, BBC Monitoring (English) and Dow Jones Commodities Service (English) carried excerpts from the embassy press release on March 5, which mentioned the meetings. (Comment: Both newswires, based on the embassy press release, accurately quoted Mann's statement on energy sector development, which appears in para. 4. End Comment.)

Inaccuracy and Russian Black Propaganda

4. (U) Following his meeting with President Berdimuhammedov, Mann expressed U.S. support and hope that Turkmenistan would "fully make

use of its potential in developing the energy sector." ITAR-TASS (March 5, English) and Today.Az (March 6, English) misleadingly reported that Mann stressed the United States was ready to render "all necessary assistance in developing Turkmenistan's fuel and energy sector."

¶5. (U) Russian news agencies ITAR-TASS, WPS-Central Asia News (March 7, English, Russian) and newspaper "Nezavisimaya Gazeta" (March 12, Russian) ran speculative "black propaganda" articles about Mann's visit, asserting that the United States was determined to revive the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project, specifically to bypass Russia. WPS-Central Asia News explained Azerbaijan's attempt to restore relations with Turkmenistan as an "indicator" of Washington's plans regarding Turkmenistan. Newspaper "Nezavisimaya Gazeta" explained that the warmer relationship between Ashgabat and Washington was due to U.S. strategic interests in the region and rising world gas prices. The newspaper printed Russian Strategic Studies Institute analyst Ashdar Kurtov's analysis about the visit. Kurtov explained the improvement of U.S.-Turkmenistan relations as a plan to complete the encirclement of Iran in preparation for military operations against that country, because Turkmenistan was the only bordering country with no U.S. Forces. Newswire Global Insight Daily Analysis (March 8, English) supported the idea of U.S. attempts to realize the Trans-Caspian pipeline, but explained Mann's visit as demonstrating a U.S. intention to "ensure sufficient political headaches" for other competitors for influence in the country.

COMMENT

¶10. (U) Mann's visit received positive coverage on state media. Despite the inaccuracy over Mann's greeting to the president, state media accurately delivered the U.S. intention to open a new chapter

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in the bilateral relationship and expand cooperation. However, Russian "black media" attempted to place misleading emphasis on U.S. intentions and thus perpetuate a "great game" vision of relations in Turkmenistan and Central Asia.

¶11. (U) Post notes that its general lack of access to Russian media representatives from Ashgabat makes countering "great game" claims about U.S. policy difficult. Russian TV broadcasts are widely seen by citizens of Turkmenistan and almost certainly influence the country's largely unmeasured, unpollled public opinion about the United States. Increased state media coverage of international -- and particularly embassy -- events and programs (septel) offers hope that, for this month at least, the positive will help to overshadow the Russian black media's more negative spin. End Comment.

BRUSH

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Cleared:
CHG
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[B1]I always want for there to be a message in the subject line
[B2]A PRESS RELEASE IS NOT A REFTTEL
[B3]Watch for the spacing and formatting, leave a space between the header and the text.
[B4]I prefer using the english translation of neytralniy spelling of a cognate always bothered me. the next guy may tell you the opposite.